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By Ronnie Chatah

Letter From Beirut

Four weeks ago, Wednesday morning, July 12, I woke up to the sound of fireworks going off next to my building. I went out to the balcony and noticed that most of south Beirut (my balcony view) was celebrating something. Fireworks go off all the time. The World Cup final game celebrations were more intense than whatever was audible or visible that morning, so I, like many others, didn't think much of it.

I went to pick up an American friend of mine at the airport and on our way back to my family's apartment (through south-Beirut) the fireworks seemed to pick up quite a bit. On the news at home, we heard that Hezbollah had launched an operation into northern Israel – just across the border – and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers, killed three, and were celebrating their temporary victory against Israel.

I spent most of that day showing Kristina around Beirut, noticing that things were quieting down early, and that most of the streets were calmer than usual. Beirut is a vibrant, relaxed, congested, dynamic, hospitable, loud and fun – a schizophrenic city with or without problems in the South. And Beirut that day was not its usual disorderly state. It was ominously quiet.

My brother had a flight out early Thursday morning, around 4:30 am. His flight was the last one out before Israel launched its offensive, since one of Israel's first targets was the airport. The runways were destroyed and the fuel depot burned throughout the night. Later that morning, Beirut started to shut down. By noon it was quiet and the mood changed that afternoon when we learned that Israel had imposed a naval blockade around Lebanon; that bridges, tunnels and the highways to Syria were to be targeted. Sure enough, over the next two days they were destroyed. Thursday night was probably the scariest night to be in Beirut. My family, Kristina, and I watched south Beirut go up in flames. The intensity of the explosions thumped against our apartment windows, sounding off car alarms below. I didn't fall asleep that night until 7am – if merely for a few hours, only to wake up again to more explosions.

Friday, I couldn't see south Beirut. The dust in the air was incredible, and the bombings continued. I have not seen south Lebanon except on TV and most of the South has been hit more than Dahyeh (Beirut's southern suburbs). The air smelled foul from the burning fuel depot that

was still burning. That day, and since then, Beirut has been unrecognizable. I lived here in 1996 when Israel launched a similar campaign against Hezbollah, but the operation was distant, only at times involving Dahyeh, although many Lebanese were killed in the South. But despite the power plants blowing up and cell phones jamming, life went on then. Since Friday, Beirut has been closed. A few supermarkets and pharmacies are now open for a couple hours during the day and I've seen a few jewelry shops stay open for the few tourists remaining. (As of Sunday, there will probably be no foreigners left in this city.) Beirut's streets are empty, there is no traffic (unbelievable here), and the corniche - our seaside promenade - is deserted.

This is a Beirut that I've never seen, but familiar to my parents who lived in Lebanon during the early years of the civil war. My family left in 1976 but from 1970 to 1975 (the years leading up to the war) Beirut went through similar phases of fear, anxiety, and waiting... waiting to see what the Israelis, Palestinians, and Syrians would do. And today, again, we're waiting for what the Israelis, Iranians, and Syrians will do. And, similar to 30 years ago, the Lebanese that have nothing to do with this war are stuck in the middle, and slowly (and scarily) taking opposing sides. The hints of civil strife are already here. I strongly believe that we, Lebanese and the Lebanese Diaspora, whether Christian, Muslim, Druze, Shiite, Sunni, Maronite, Orthodox, Armenian, or Palestinian, are determined to keep this country alive and make it stand on its own two feet. We are fed up with war, with useless battles that only make things worse for all of us. And we hope to succeed in the end. Unfortunately, forces stronger than the neutral (and perhaps acquiescent) majority are determined to keep the fight going and we will have to sit by and wait for the status quo to change once again.

I am a Sunni Muslim (I'm stuck with these labels here), agnostic, Lebanese and American. I live in a Maronite neighborhood, spend most of my free time hiking in the Druze Mountains, love the Shiite beaches in the south and regularly visit family in the conservative Sunni north. I dated an Israeli-Jew (the best solution to perceived conflict: date your enemy!), and lived in DC with a Jewish roommate who could not get enough of my falafel. All this is great, and our similarities are much greater than our differences. Alas, not everyone in this country had similar experiences - and those who did and do are unable to influence the centers of power. This might be the biggest obstacle to any peace movement's effective work and any attempt at conflict resolution. Amira Haas of Haaretz says that the responsibility of a journalist is to monitor the centers of power; journalists can be one of the strongest catalysts of political change. At this moment in time, the Lebanese people - including its journalists - feel powerless, and I, too, feel weak here as all this is happening around me. All I (and all but a few Lebanese) can do, is wait for the centers of power to resolve their differences, at their own pace, at their own convenience.

It's the hundreds of Lebanese and dozens of Israelis that have died so far that pay the consequences of the various leaderships' grievances. How

can we, the population that suffers – other than voting and debating the various political issues – effectively monitor our centers of power and demand that they be held accountable? Our government is weak and cannot hold Hezbollah accountable for their actions four weeks ago while we are under attack. The Israelis, despite their overwhelming support for this war while Hezbollah attacks, cannot stand up and ask that their government to stop killing innocents in Lebanon while innocent Israelis are killed. Empowering the silent majorities on both sides is a very difficult, perhaps impossible task. I want Hezbollah disarmed and I want Israel to stop its bombardment of Lebanon. I think I represent what most Lebanese and most Israelis want, but there are powers that are too strong (or amorphous) to challenge. To challenge Hezbollah now means civil war here – perhaps open war against Syria and Iran. To challenge the Israeli campaign in Lebanon is presented as pro-terrorist and certainly anti-Israel. I have signed on to a humanitarian-volunteer organization that works at schools that are sheltering Shiite refugees from the south, distributes food and engages with children in various activities. Basic stuff, but important to the refugees that sleep on blank mattresses, awaiting the return to their destroyed homes. For now, in addition to checking e-mail and watching TV, waiting – waiting for something to happen – is the most I can do.

I am staying here with my family despite the evacuation. Neither my mother, nor my father have American citizenship – and even if they did, they would refuse to give up on Lebanon, which, to them, means staying behind, signifying their determination to see this war end. Kristina left Lebanon two weeks ago and with her thousands of other summer tourists that rediscovered Beirut as the ‘Paris of the Middle East’ only to flee a war that is destroying this country and 16 long years worth of reconstruction. Hopefully history will stop repeating itself in this corner of the world and hopefully all this will end in the coming days. While every shell tilts the balance from hope towards cynicism, the determination among most Lebanese is palpable: We will then put this summer behind us and rebuild Lebanon once again.

Ronnie Chatah is a Masters Candidate in International Affairs, Middle East Studies and Conflict Resolution at The George Washington University's Elliot School of International Affairs.

